



# Data Collection Methods



## **Statewide Uniform Statistical Reporting System 1999 Client Baseline Study**

Center for Families, Children & the Courts  
Judicial Council of California  
Administrative Office of the Courts

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## **1999 Client Baseline Study**

### **DATA COLLECTION METHODS**

**T**he 1999 Client Baseline Study is a representative cross-section of parents using family court services across the state. Like its 1991, 1993, and 1996 predecessors, the 1999 Client Baseline Study offers reliable statistics about the utility of family court services and documents the prevailing experiences of clients in court-based resolution of disputes about child custody and visitation. The 1999 study was designed to continue to chart trends and changes since 1991 and to address questions raised in light of continually rising caseloads, changes in demographics of family court users, and changes in law and court procedures.

The 1999 Client Baseline Study is part of a program of research that fulfills the Center for Families, Children & the Courts' (CFCC) mandate to provide uniform statewide statistics that advise family law policy. Entitled the Statewide Uniform Statistical Reporting System (SUSRS), the program's mission is to provide rigorous statistics on issues facing policymakers, judges, attorneys, court personnel, researchers, special-interest groups, and parents who use the family courts.

To ensure that the research program addresses pressing needs for information with a high rate of client input, CFCC employs a collaborative research model. Research questions are identified in consultation with policy leaders, family court service directors and coordinators, direct service providers, and parents who use family court services across the state. Data collection methods that facilitate client participation on a confidential basis are developed in site visits and in consultation with individual court-based mediators. Primary responsibility for the scientific merit, administration, and analysis of the findings rests with CFCC.

#### **Study Design and Content**

CFCC's Client Baseline Studies are designed to collect information about all clients using family court services across the state within the designated time period of the research. Mediation of child-custody and visitation issues is the service provided most often, however the various courts offer a wide range of family court services, meeting diverse needs throughout the state. In addition to child-custody mediation, the 1999 Client Baseline Study collected data about partial child-custody evaluations and investigations,<sup>1</sup> full child-custody evaluations

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<sup>1</sup>This label covered a variety of services offered in many family courts. These include emergency screenings, ex parte screenings, brief assessments, fast-track evaluations, ASAP screenings, mini-

and investigations, and guardianships. Premarital counseling, stepparent adoption, counseling on other family matters, and other family court services were counted, but no other information about those services was gathered. The 1999 study included a survey of family court service directors and a survey of service providers. The two-week period from September 27 through October 8, 1999, was designated as the study period.

Chart 1 summarizes the design and content of the 1999 Client Baseline Study. The client questionnaires were available in both English and Spanish.

For **child-custody mediation sessions**, three questionnaires were administered:

- The *Client Profile* was completed by each parent before the session. This questionnaire covered the family's current situation, issues each person was bringing to the session, and parent and child demographics.
- Immediately after the custody mediation session, each parent was asked to complete a *Parent Viewpoint* questionnaire, which was returned in a sealed envelope addressed to the Statewide Office. This form gave parents the opportunity to evaluate the mediation process, their particular mediator, and the session just completed. To permit comparisons over time, the 1999 *Parent Viewpoint* repeated many of the questions included on the 1991, 1993, and 1996 forms. These asked for feedback about the helpfulness of the mediation process and whether issues were given a fair hearing, as well as general satisfaction with the process and the outcome of mediation, areas of discomfort with the process as well as perceptions of respectful and fair treatment of clients. The 1999 *Parent Viewpoint* added a few questions about the usefulness of any orientation the parent received.
- The *Counselor Report*, describing the process and outcome of the session, was completed by the counselor after each session.

For **partial evaluations/investigations**, (a form of expedited evaluation) a similar *Client Profile--PE* and a *Partial Evaluation/Investigation Report* which included many of the questions on the mediation *Counselor Report* were used. Counselors were asked to include all partial evaluations completed during the snapshot study period. Anticipating that there could be a substantial number of partial evaluations where the parents were not in the office during the study period, demographic questions from the *Profile* were added to the *Partial Evaluation Report* for the counselor to provide.

For **full evaluations/investigations**, no client forms were used because, unlike mediation and, to a lesser extent, partial evaluation, clients were very unlikely to be in the family court services' offices on the day when the counselors filled out

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evaluations, and expedited investigations. The term, partial, was meant to distinguish these services from the more traditional full child-custody investigation and evaluation.

their questionnaires. For each investigation/evaluation completed by family court services staff in the two-week study period, the counselor was asked to fill out a *Full Evaluation/ Investigation Report* describing the process, outcomes, and recommendations, and providing some information about the family. A case was considered completed when the counselor was ready to submit the report. The report's completion during the two-week study period was used as the criterion for including the case in the study because only at that point could the counselor provide complete information about the case. Questions focussing on the counselor's procedures and activities in conducting the evaluation/investigation were replicated in the various "investigation" forms, i.e., the *Full Evaluation/Investigation Report*, *Partial Evaluation/Investigation Report*, *Recommending page* of the *mediation Counselor Report*, and the *Guardianship Investigation/Mediation Report*.

For **guardianship investigations** and **mediations** completed in the two-week study period by staff considered part of family court services, the counselor filled out a *Guardianship Investigation/Mediation Report* describing the case, process, outcomes, and recommendations. As in the full evaluations/investigations, and for the same reasons, a case was considered completed when the counselor submitted the report. No client forms were used because guardianship clients were not likely to be in the offices on the same day the report was completed.

All direct providers of family court services across the state were asked to fill out a brief questionnaire, *Service Provider Registration Form*, indicating their gender, ethnicity, education, credentials, experience, and describing their perception of changes in family courts during their tenures and their views of issues they face. A similar service provider survey was first used in the 1996 Snapshot Study and provided an interesting background for understanding the results of the Snapshot Study. (See Report 7, *Serving Families in the 90's, The Perspective of Direct Service Providers*, June 1997.)

Family Court Services directors in each superior court completed the *1999 Snapshot Study Directors' Questionnaire*, an inventory of services currently provided in their courts and questions describing their service models, a few months before the Snapshot study period. The responses to the questionnaires were used in designing the major data collection. At the end of the study period, directors filled out another questionnaire, *1999 Snapshot Study Directors' Follow-up Questionnaire* which included a tally of services actually provided within the data collection period. This count made it possible to calculate the percentage of cases for which research data was provided. The questionnaire also included more questions about the service model and details on services provided.

## Coverage and Representativeness

Chart 1 shows the percentage of mediation study participants who completed each form. For child custody and visitation mediation sessions, the counselor filled out a *Counselor Report* for each family in the sample. Eighty-six percent of the parents seen in mediation filled out the *Client Profile*<sup>2</sup>. In the 1999 Client Baseline Study, as in the earlier data collections, almost equal percentages of mothers (87 percent) and fathers (85 percent) provided data and about 4.5 percent (202) used a Spanish language questionnaire. Only 63 percent of the mediating parents filled out the Parent Viewpoint; further analyses are needed to explain this low rate and identify any source of systematic bias.

**CHART 1**  
**1999 Client Baseline Study**  
**Design and Content**

### Child-Custody and Visitation Mediation Sessions

Questionnaire:	<i>Client Profile</i>	<i>Counselor Report</i>	<i>Parent Viewpoint</i>
Completed by:	Each mediation client	Counselor or mediator	Each mediation client
When completed:	Pre-session	Post-session	Post-session
Percent completed:	86%	100%	63%
Contents:	Demographic profile of parents, children  De facto parenting arrangements  Children's problems  Presenting issues  Interparental relationship/conflict  Coparenting issues	Background of case  Parties present  Special procedures  Allegations  Issues covered  Status of case before and after session  Agreements made  Special provisions	Helpfulness of service  Opportunity to discuss issues  Satisfaction with process  Perception of fairness and respect shown by mediator  Satisfaction with and evaluation of results

<sup>2</sup> Number of parents seen in mediation is taken from the Counselor's Report. Counselors reported seeing 2,661 mothers and 2,600 fathers during the study period, for a total of 5,261 parents. We received 2,317 Client Profiles from mothers and 2,201 from fathers, a total of 4,518 or 86% of parents seen.

(CHART 1 Continued)

Other Services				
Questionnaire:	<i>Client Profile—PE</i>	<i>Partial Evaluation/ Investigation Report</i>	<i>Full Evaluation/ Investigation Report</i>	<i>Guardianship Investigation/ Mediation Report</i>
Completed by:	Each client	Evaluator/ Counselor	Evaluator/ Counselor	Investigator/ counselor
When completed:	Before session with evaluator	When case completed, recommendation ready.	When case completed, report submitted.	When case completed, report submitted or for Guardianship Mediations, after mediation session.
Percent completed:	77%	100%		
Contents:	Demographic profile of parents, children  De facto parenting arrangements  Children's problems  Presenting issues  Interparental relationship/conflict  Coparenting issues	Background of case  Demographic profile of parents, children  Allegations  Issues covered  Agreements made  Special provisions  Scope of evaluation / investigation  Assessment of case and parents	Background of case  Children's and Parents' demographics  Allegations  Issues considered  Child issues  Recommendations  Special provisions  Scope of evaluation / investigation  Assessment of case and parents	Background of case  Parties involved  Children's demographics  Allegations  Child issues  Scope of investigation  Recommendations  Special provisions

For child custody mediation, Chart 1 provided the completion rates for the instruments (that is, what proportion of all clients participating in sessions also filled out the questionnaires). For partial evaluations the percent completing the Client Profile—PE refers to the proportion of partial evaluations with at least one parent filling out the questionnaire.

The broader issue of coverage is how well the sessions included in the research represent family court service sessions throughout the state. The 1991, 1993, and 1996 Client Baseline Studies were able to provide sound statistics and prevalence data for court-based mediation throughout the state because each of those samples was a representative cross-section of court mediation sessions. The information summarized in Chart 2 indicates that for court-based child custody and visitation mediation, the 1999 Client Baseline Study sample is, again, a representative cross-section of California court-based mediation sessions.

**CHART 2**  
**1999 Client Baseline Study**  
**September 27 - October 8, 1996**  
**Completion Rates**

<b>SERVICE</b>	<b>Total Number Statewide</b>	<b>Number Included In Study</b>	<b>Percent Included</b>
Child-custody and visitation mediation sessions	3,517	2,812	80%
Partial Evaluation sessions	241	158	66%
Full Evaluations	25	17	68%
Guardianship investigations and Mediations	69	51	74%
<p>Number of California counties participating in study                      54 out of 58*</p> <p>Child-Custody and Visitation Mediation sample:</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Families    2,812    (Counselor Reports)</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Mothers    2,317    (Client Profiles)</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Fathers      2,201    (Client Profiles)</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Children    4,199</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Families with data from mother and father    2,018</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Families with data from mother, father, or both    2,500</p> <p>*Three counties do not have court-based mediation: Alpine, Inyo, Mono. Only one county with court-based mediation, San Benito, was unable to participate in this study.</p>			

The objective of the 1999 Client Baseline Study was to include all families who used family court services in the state of California during the study period, September 27 through October 8, 1999. The study covered 54 of the 55 California counties with court-based mediation (3 of California's 58 counties did not have court-based mediation at that time). Information was gathered on 3,038 families seen by court-based mediators and counselors for mediation, partial evaluation, full evaluation, and guardianship investigation during that period. Overall, that



number represents 79 percent of all families seen for these services. Extensive information was collected about 2,812 families participating in court-based custody mediation during the study period, 80 percent of all families in court mediation throughout the state. The study included 68 percent of the 25 full evaluations completed by Family Court Services staff, 66 percent of the partial evaluation sessions, and 69 percent of the guardianship investigations completed during the two-week period.

The completion rates for child custody mediation surpass the accepted standards of survey research in defining a sample that can be used to establish reliable statistics and prevalence data for a population. The completion rate for guardianship investigations is well within the range of acceptability and the partial and full evaluation completion rate is within the range of acceptability but somewhat below our standard. In addition, the numbers of partial and, especially, full evaluations and guardianship investigations are too small to permit reliable inferences. The methodologies for those services may need to be reconsidered.

Court-based child-custody and visitation mediation is the major focus of the Client Baseline Study because it is the service provided most often by family court services. The 1999 Client Baseline Study along with the 1991, 1993, and 1996 Client Baseline Studies offer the most representative and comprehensive data about court-based mediation in California.